



Indiana's tourism industry holds its own; now is the time to show your support

By Amy Vaughan

Most of us have never experienced a year quite like 2009. And probably most of us look forward to its end and better times ahead. And yet, in a year that proved stressful for all of us, we realized more than ever the importance of spending time with family and friends.

With low consumer confidence, economic uncertainty and job security concerns, people across the country stayed closer to home this year. In an environment of saving more and spending less, there was an increased value place on using coupons and discounts in this "new normal."

We saw these same trends in Indiana as well. It was definitely a challenging year for Indiana's tourism industry. As the summer, Indiana's busiest tourism season, began, our tourism industry was cautiously optimistic. If "flat was the new up," many Indiana tourism attractions hoped to just stay even with last year.

And yet, many Indiana's tourism attractions exceeded their summer attendance expectations. Most attractions had attendance figures that were up slightly over last year, and some fared even better.

It makes sense. As a travel destination, Indiana has always been reasonably priced and provided a strong value. The state's leisure travel fared best. For example, attendance at the Ft. Wayne Children's Zoo was up 15 percent over last year. The addition of its new African Journey exhibit contributed to an all time high attendance of 545,000 visitors. At Conner Prairie, overall visitation was up and its new balloon exhibit attendance exceeded projections by more than three times. Holiday World and Splashin Safari's attendance was up 2 percent over last year as well. Meanwhile, Evansville's Metsker Park Zoo's attendance was up 15 percent over last year.

Hotels and restaurants continue to struggle nationally and in Indiana. Recent figures from the National Restaurant Association show that Indiana restaurants reported same-store sales and traffic results similar to the national average. Nineteen percent of Indiana respondents reported higher same-store sales while 56 percent reported a sales decline. Operators reported net-negative sales for the 15th consecutive month but Indiana operators are more optimistic about the general business conditions in 6 months than reported nationally.

On the hotel side, the news is even less optimistic. Industry experts do not expect an imminent recovery. PKF Hospitality Research forecasts record declines this year, and they do not feel revenue per available room levels will increase until 2011.

Thankfully, as the year winds down, we're beginning to see some signs of recovery. And, in the midst of fall we're reminded of the passing of time and the importance of making memories with family and friends. With pumpkin patches, hayrides and apple orchards, fall is rich with opportunities to create annual family traditions.

There's still time to take advantage of the many great experiences here in Indiana. Hoosiers can save money by traveling in-state and support Indiana's tourism businesses. With family attractions, scenic drives, festivals, shopping, destination restaurants, outdoor recreation and wineries, the options are endless.

A great trip planning resource is VisitIndiana.com. View the Leaf Cams in Brown County, Spring Mill State Park, the French Lick Resort, Corydon and The Fort Golf Course for updates on fall color. And check out the more than 300 discounts, including offers such as: \$229 Family Fun Package at French Lick Resort; \$2 off Bluespring Caverns fall boat ride; \$140 rate at the Leavenworth Inn with breakfast and wine tasting; two for one admission at the Studebaker National Museum; \$2 off Conner Prairie admission; and \$10 off Amish Acres regular room rate.

Not only can Hoosiers save money by traveling in-state, they also help an important segment of Indiana's small businesses. Did you know that 90% of all tourism businesses in Indiana can be classified as small businesses? Indiana entrepreneurs own cabins, hotels, restaurants, shops, attractions, wineries, marinas and more. People who live in our communities are investing their own money in businesses and attractions that are supported by tourism.

Tourism is also important when it comes to jobs. Tourism provides jobs for approximately 275,000 Hoosier. More than 62 million visitors come to Indiana each year, and they spend \$10 billion in local communities.

For trip ideas, festivals/events and more than 300 discounts, log on to VisitIndiana.com.

Vaughan is the director of the Indiana Office of Tourism Development.